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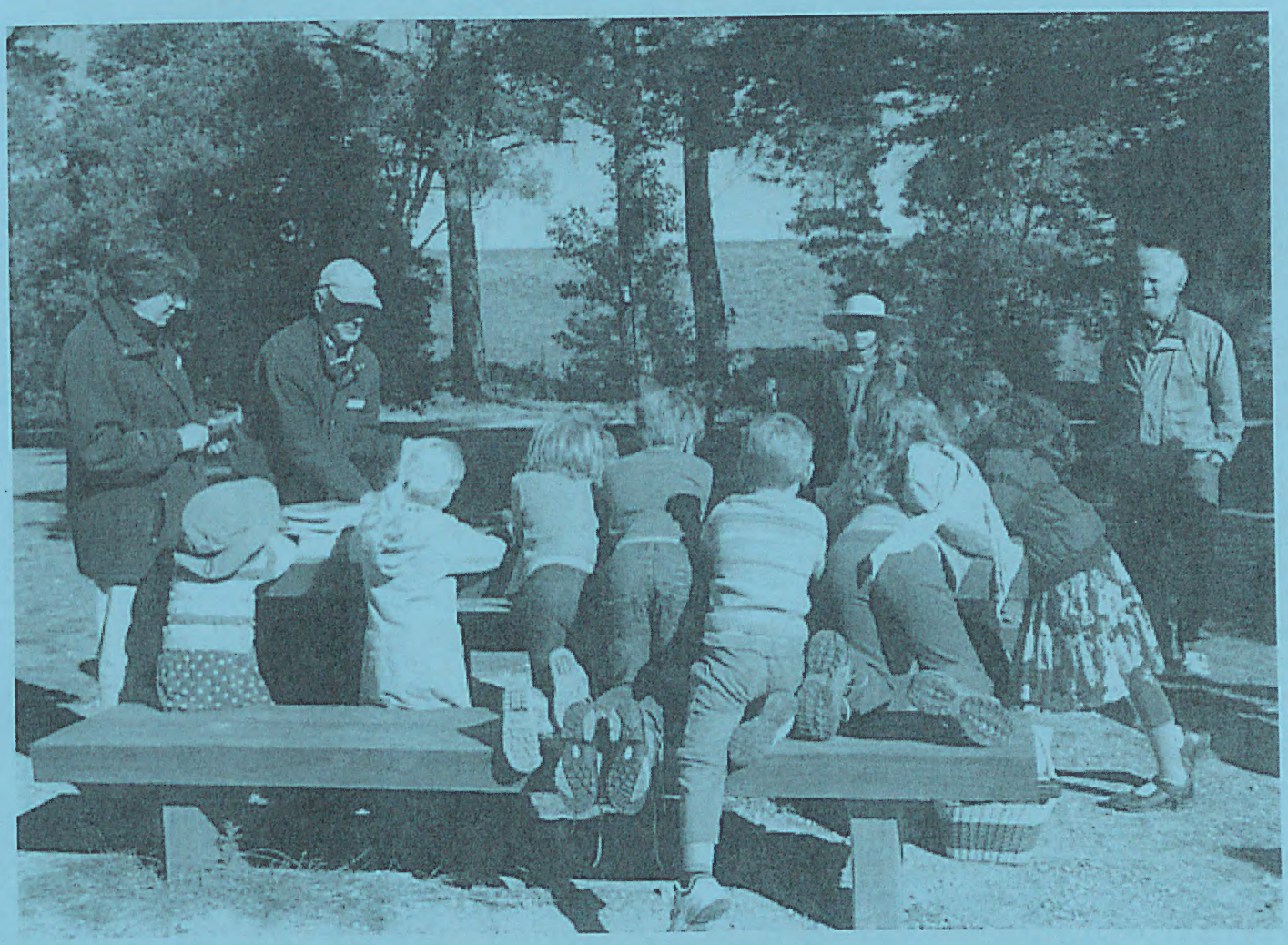
WHIRRAKEE

June 2012

Vol. 33 No. 5

Registered by Australia Post. Publication No. VBH4462



MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE BENDIGO FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB

Bendigo Field Naturalists Club Inc.

Address for correspondence: PO Box 396, Bendigo 3552. Web address: www.BendigoFNC.com.au
ISSN 0812-423X

Office Bearers for 2011 - 2012

President	Jan Orr	5443 5668
Senior Vice President	Matthew Comer	0409 162627
Junior Vice President	*position vacant*	
Secretary	Stuart Fraser	5443 1326
Minute Secretary	Anne Bridley	
Treasurer	Ben Goonan	
Membership Officer	Anne Bridley	5442 6188
Excursion organiser	*position vacant*	
Syllabus organiser	Ben Goonan	
Librarian	Diana Collier (an assistant is still required)	5443 0137
Garden Convenor/Secretary	Matthew Comer	0409 162 627
Hall Management	Maurie Lewis (assisted by Rob Moors)	0407 427179
Whirrakee contact	Sabine Wilkens e-mail: s.wilkens@latrobe.edu.au	5443 2797
Whirrakee mailing coordinator	Rod Orr	5443 5668

Membership of the Bendigo Field Naturalists Club is open to all those interested in Natural History. The subscription rates are: Single $34; Family $40; Concession: Single $28.50; Family $34. *Whirrakee* subscription only is $34.

General meetings are held on the second Wednesday of each month. The venue for General meetings is the Golden Square Senior Citizens Building, Old High Street, Golden Square. The meeting starts with a 10 minute thing-of-the night natural history segment. The invited speaker starts at 8:00pm and meetings conclude with supper. The Annual Meeting is held in September.

Committee meetings are held on the third Wednesday of each month at 6:00pm. Members of the Committee are the Office Bearer listed above and the following members: Anne Bridley, Glenise Moors, Joy Clusker, Kerrie Norris, John Lindner.

Excursions are conducted regularly and are advertised on the diary page of the *Whirrakee*. The assembly point for excursions is the Golden Square Senior Citizens Building, unless otherwise specified. Several interclub field naturalist campouts are held every year.

The Bendigo Field Naturalists Club has one sub-group (the Fauna Study Group) and is actively involved in local conservation issues. An **indigenous garden** has been established around the Golden Square Senior Citizens Building. Working bees are advertised on the *Whirrakee* diary page.

Fauna Study Group: Chairman: John Burtonclay, Fadersons Lane, Mandurang (5439 5710)
Secretary: Bill Holsworth, 13 Nabilla Crs., Bendigo (5443 4063)
Equipment Officer: Maurie Lewis (0407 427179)
Regular fauna excursions take place most Fridays. See page 11 for details.

Bird Observing: Club members conduct regular bird surveys. Please contact Anne Bridley 5442 6188 or Glenise Moors 5439 6254 for details. Special bird observations should be reported to Anne Bridley 5442 6188.
To propose bird observing excursions please contact Kerrie Norris 5447 8017.

Front cover photo?...see page 2

WHIRRAKEE

Monthly Newsletter of the Bendigo Field Naturalist Club
Vol. 33, No. 5, June 2012
Whirrakee takes its name from the Whirrakee Wattle (*Acacia williamsonii*) which is virtually endemic to the Bendigo region

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Authors are responsible for the accuracy of the information they use and also for any opinions expressed in their articles. Contributions will be included as soon as possible after they are received, although articles received more than one week after the monthly General Meeting will probably be too late for inclusion in the next issue of *Whirrakee*.
Articles in *Whirrakee* may be reproduced, but permission should be obtained from the Bendigo Field Naturalists Club, and acknowledgment should be given to the author and the Club. Some back issues are still available on request.

Editor's Note
Recently, the Discovery Centre (near the railway station) had a visiting bus from Melbourne Museum holding three natural history workshops for children. I helped with one of these, and it was just fantastic. The Centre also runs a regular program called 'Curious Kids', which is aimed at the very small ones and they have many happenings that would appeal to children of all ages outside their day-to-day business. Lisa Gormley, the manager, has an interest and background in environmental science, and is very keen on offerings in that field. Why not check out their website? If you have any ideas how the Centre could be involved in the club's interests and activities, don't hesitate to discuss them with Lisa.

Front page photographer: Joy Clusker
The Family Nature Club excursion in May took place in perfect weather and in a perfect setting at Crusoe Reservoir. In the photo, the adults are looking on, while the younger participants crowd around a mystery 'found object' on the table. The May excursion was about fungi. However, the weather has been so dry that there wasn't a huge supply of species, but, as usual, many other interesting things were found, see page 5 for more photos.

Short Notices

2012 Excursion Program
In June we will have two of our 'practice excursions' for the SEANA Camp in August. *Please note that details for the July excursion may change, so check your next* Whirrakee.

Saturday June 16 9:30 am - 4:30 pm
Focus: Botany and birds
Venue: Forests South-east of Bendigo
Leader: Anne Bridley
Meeting point: Bendigo Field Naturalists' Clubrooms, Old High St. Golden Square
Bring: binoculars, lunch, water and clothes for all weathers. **Contact person:** Jan Orr, 54435668 r.orr@westnet.com.au

Sunday 24th June
Departing BFNC Clubrooms **8.30am**
Focus: Wetlands
Leader and contact person: Ben Goonan, 54463587

Saturday July 14 9:30 am - 4:30 pm
Focus: Botany and birds
Venue: Kamarooka **Leader**: Matthew Comer
Meeting point: Bendigo Field Naturalists' Clubrooms, Old High St. Golden Square
Bring: binoculars, lunch, water and clothes for all weathers **Contact person:** Jan Orr, 54435668 r.orr@westnet.com.au

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Fire Operations Planning Consultation.

Regional environment groups have been working to improve the Fire Operations Planning (FOP) consultation process. DSE have offered an opportunity for environment groups to participate in a FOP consultation in July, and to follow this up with another meeting in September.

The meeting will be held on **Thursday 12th July 2012, 5-9 pm.**
Further information will be available when an agenda has been established and DSE has invited participation from regional environment groups. If you would like further information, or are interested in participating please contact Richard Goonan at:
richardgoonan@impulse.net.au

A visit to Corner Country

by Mal Haysom

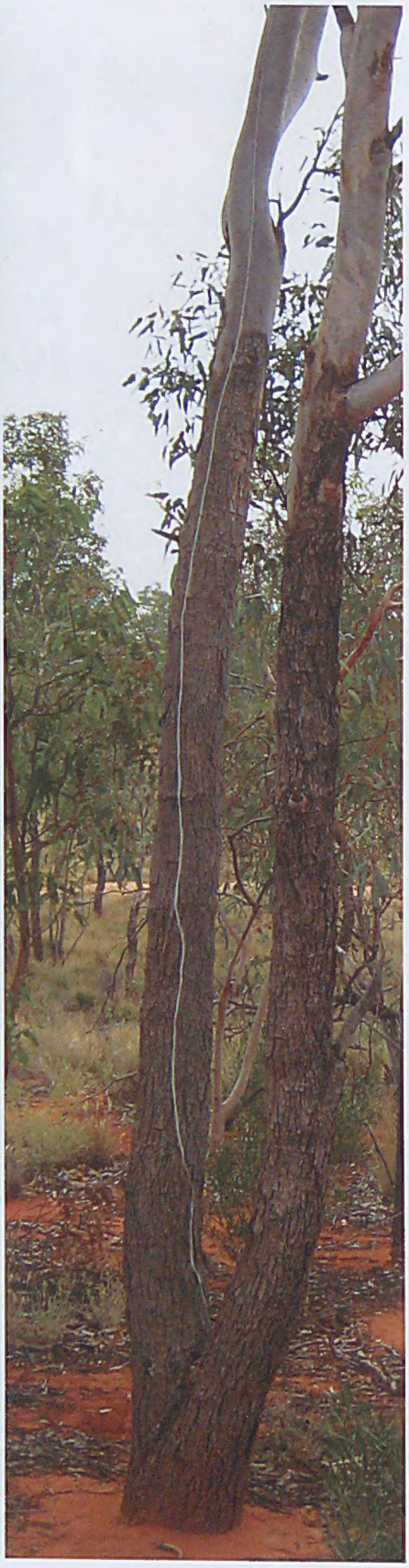
Fort Grey Basin is usually dry (a park walking trail crosses it) but in April this year, it contained a significant amount of water. (No possibility of walking across it.) The country in that region of Australia had received recent good rain and was covered with excellent pasture. One of the owners at the nearby Cameron Corner store told us with delight of the morning when she woke up to the sound of vast numbers of burrowing frogs croaking. "Forty years they waited for rain." she said. (2012 – 1974 (the last major flood) approximately equals forty years.) She is a great believer in "cycles". Her view is we are too impatient (certainly not as patient as the burrowing frogs!) and in its own good time nature will produce the conditions for new life.

She tells the story of the academic and his students (bush people like telling academic stories, they believe, perhaps not without some justification, that academics are not totally in touch with the real world) who came up to the Corner to check the hopping mouse population. When they had finished, the academics were shaking their heads sadly about the declining population. Then, she explained with a broad smile, the rain came, the conditions improved, "and there were millions and millions and millions of the little buggers".

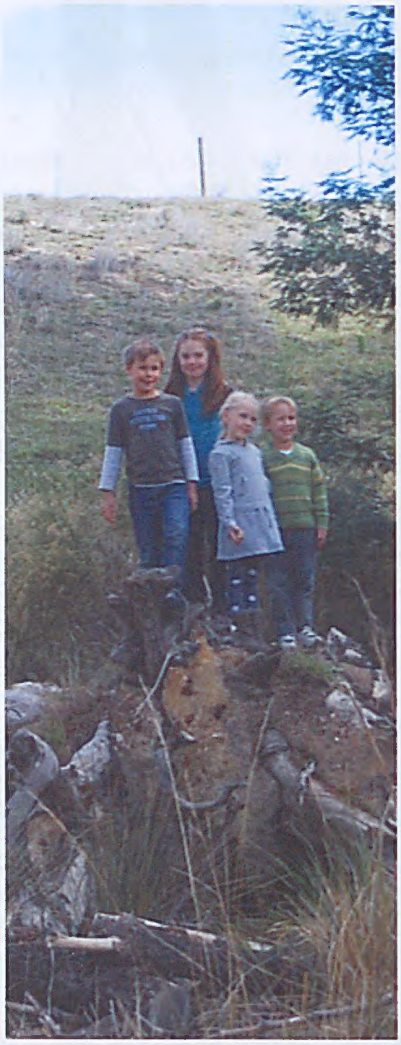
The 'woven bag' on page 4, and many others seen in the area, were about 150 – 200 mm in diameter, filled with hairy caterpillars and 2 – 6 metres above the ground. Silky trails ran to (or from ?) them. The one on page 4 ran down the limb that the bag is on, then up the main trunk out of sight.

Corner Country Caterpillars: These photos were taken on the 22nd of April 2012 near Fort Grey Basin, Sturt National Park in the north-west corner of NSW. However examples could be seen over a region hundreds of kilometres in extent. See page 3 for the story. (Photographer: Mal Haysom)

Detail of trail on the left and extent of it on the right.



Family Nature club excursion : 'Fungi excursion' (Photos by Joy Clusker).
Check out Tamara Marwood's blog of the Family Nature Club activities and more photos at:
http://bendigofamilynatureclub.blogspot.com.au/



Despite the prevailing dry autumn weather, some interesting specimens of fungi were seen.

Below on the right are earthstars, and on the left, a handful of gecko or skink eggs!

↓ Bats and Boxes…May club excursion led by Kerrie Norris

Unidentified Spring Gully fungi ↑ (Photo taken in May by Jenny Shield)

A few days later, they had dried out. Here the 'gilled' underside is shown→

← This is a small part of the glorious display of succulents, which Michelle and Attila Kapitany brought with them for the May general meeting. See page 9 for the summary

Burning practices at the Wellsford forest have devastated the understory and damaged many fully-grown trees (see page 8 for Rod's article). See also Richard Goonan's notice on Fire Operations Plan meeting on page 3. (Photographer: Rod Orr)

The Burning of our Forests

Author: Rod Orr

It's no wonder that the Wellsford Forest has become a 'Bird Desert'. The sort of forest-care shown in the photo on page 7 has led to the destruction of virtually every small area of bird habitat for feeding or nesting in this entire vast forest. The shrubs have been suppressed almost to extinction and now the fire-sensitive eucalypts are being severely burnt as well.

The Wellsford Forest will soon become a 'Shrub Desert' too, and perhaps even a virtual monoculture of fire-resistant tree species.

Even though the relatively fire-resistant Red Ironbarks suffer extensive charring of their bark and survive fire reasonably well, Yellow Gum has much thinner bark and is more severely damaged if the cambium layer becomes so hot that the sap boils. Then the bark dies and falls off completely, which often leads to the death of the tree after only one such event. Yellow Gum, Red Stringy-bark, Red Box, Grey Box, Yellow Box & Long-leaf Box are also all much more fire-sensitive than Red Ironbark so the species composition of this forest will be changed by such a fire regime which frequently and regularly scorches the trees to the tops of their canopies.

The eventual result, if any trees at all are allowed to persist, will be a pure Red Ironbark forest just like the ones that you can see in areas which were once deliberately managed in this way by Forestry. Favoured trees were retained, less 'useful' species were suppressed until they disappeared.

For example, you will find no Red Stringy-barks anywhere near Bendigo that are any-thing more than thin saplings, which have been able to grow in the period since the end of selective forestry management of forest areas close to the city. You will not find any good, large, old specimens until you travel as far as the eastern end of the Mandurang Valley where some massive Red Stringybarks still survive, but only on private property.

For the native fauna which still manages to cling to life here, the continual destruction of any native vegetation that can be deliberately burnt by the Department of Sustainability and Environment means only that they are utterly doomed. Sugar Gliders, Brush-tailed Phasco-gales (Tuans), Yellow-footed Antechinus, Dunnarts, if any still remain in the entire Wellsford Forest, face relentless pressure just to survive. Their numbers will continue to decline because they need good quality foraging and nesting habitat to be able to breed and feed their young, but anything that looks like good habitat for animals is seen to be fire-prone and becomes the prime focus for fuel reduction burning by shrub destruction, no matter how small these areas are. Even after a patchy fuel reduction burn, the usual practice is to 'Black Out' the burnt area, which means burning everything that remains to prevent the spread of fire within or from the burnt area. Nothing is protected for the benefit (or survival) of native fauna, which is all threatened by the single-minded focus on shrub destruction everywhere in our forests.

The damaged tree shown on page 7 is not unique! Square kilometres of the Wellsford Forest have been burnt to this degraded condition during 2011 and 2012. They are easy to find and directions could be given to anyone interested in seeing for themselves how Bendigo's forests are being burnt because the State Government is pretending that this will make everyone safe from wild-fires.

This ignores the fact that the terrible loss of life and property in Bendigo's Black Saturday fire was caused by arson, not wild-fire, and that the fire burnt through a grassy urban weedscape but not our surrounding forests.

You would imagine that the weed-covered derelict land that fuelled the fire and carried it towards the centre of Bendigo, would have been the focus of fire prevention, wouldn't you, but no, the grassy weeds have been allowed to grow back to more or less the same

flammable state as they were at the time of the fire.

Do Disaster Planners ever look in the right direction and focus on rational steps to improve protection by removing known risks? It doesn't appear so! It must be much easier to simply go along with a 'Burn a pre-arranged area of forest each year' plan and so appear to be managing fire risk instead! This formula certainly requires much less thought and planning and it's not even fine-tuned to match different vegetation types and regions - the Fire Code of Practice is a 'One size fits all' approach which blankets the state! This policy even results in vast areas of forest, which grow in almost deserted parts of Victoria, being burnt so that the required annual total area of forest is burnt. This waste of public money protects nobody at all because it is not targeted at the areas closely surrounding the houses where people actually live. The hope appears to be that burning the forests anywhere will protect lives everywhere, which is plainly ridiculous!

Unfortunately, the damage to the surviving native fauna in these forests will lead to their rapid decline and extinction, a process paid for by the State Government and administered by the authorities who also have the responsibility to protect these, our natural assets!

The Environment is being burnt Unsustainably by the Department of Sustainability and Environment. How strange is this?

This approach to making us all feel safer is borrowing the techniques imagined by George Orwell, explained by 'double-speak' and justified using 'double-think'. The Fire-fighters have become the Fire-lighters. Isn't that Bradbury's frightening scenario from 'Fahrenheit 451'? Perhaps these authors are required reading for Disaster Planners, Department of Sustainability and Environment Officers and Fire Teams.

May Speaker: Attila and Michelle Kapitany 'Succulent plants from Australia and elsewhere'

by Sabine Wilkens

On the Wednesday of the general meeting in May, members were greeted by an amazing display of succulents – cuttings and potted plants, the smaller items arranged neatly in trays on a long table, not just for practical use, but according to colour, shape and other aesthetic elements (see photo on page 6). In addition there were many books on gardening with succulents, field guides and display-type books with attractive pictures. Then came the talk…

Most succulents that spring to mind, after seeing Australian parks and gardens, nurseries and shops, are exotics, but Attila and Michelle have been concentrating on native succulents for about 10 years now and are finding more and more wherever they go, and their mission is to find all of them! We tend to think of them as desert plants, but most succulents actually grow on the edge of deserts, in salty country and even in rainforests - but also in our backyards.

Succulents have not had a good press, and they often possess names that represent people's values of them (just think of pig-weed or pig-face, two common local succulents that don't enjoy much admiration). So, to set out and find succulents, you need to have your pre-conceptions re-arranged, as otherwise you miss them, not only looking in the wrong places, but also looking for them in the wrong way. We may have looked at some plants for years, without realising they are succulents, as they may store water in the roots or trunk, instead of the more obvious places like leaves. The job of spotting them is made more tricky, as the term 'succulent' does not delineate a neat taxonomic group, although, it is true, in some families they are more prominently represented.

Some succulents are attractive to look at in a garden, but others are attractive <u>and</u> act as life-savers in the desert. For example,

Australian aboriginal people have known about the medicinal, nutritional and water containing value of pigface for ever, and many dry country animals also use them as a source of water. Attila mentioned that the first six weeks of an emu chick's survival depends entirely on the presence of *Calandrinia* and this genus was also an important food plant for aboriginal people. This is an amazing group (the common name of these plants is purslane), which contains numerous species, mostly undescribed, so there is much work ahead for Michelle and Attila, finding, cataloguing and describing them all.

Some of Attila's images were stunning, for example the views of wreath flowers on a roadside in Western Australia, majestic boab trees with bulging trunks, ant plants and brightly flowered, but tiny *Crassula* species.

Attila and Michelle have loved succulents for many, many years. Once their house filled with succulents, they extended to their nature strip and windowsills, into the fish tanks and onto the roof. Their lives, daily deeds and conversations are dominated by succulents – they even got married on the edge of a desert, where succulents like to grow! They have not watched TV for 10 years, and it is easy to see why. I think everyone in the audience was touched by the speakers passion and wonder for this little known group of plants.
Not surprisingly, there is also a website, at http://australiansucculents.com/
It is so full of fascinating information that everyone should go there and check it out. On the home page, when I looked at it, Attila was offering *Calandrinia* seeds of an undescribed, but soon-to-be-named species with yellow flowers (unlike the usual pink or white flowers) for sale to trial in gardens.

History of Kennington Reservoir book
Bill and Carol Holsworth's book, *A Fine Sheet of Water: Kennington Reservoir, Bendigo*, was launched at the reservoir on 26 April to a crowd of over 70 persons. The launch program planned to included a walk around the reservoir and through the forest to observe the natural history of the area, guided by several members of the BFNC. However, those attending the launch preferred to visit with each other. Bill and Carol wish to thank the BFNC members who volunteered to conduct the walks.
The first printing of the book is almost sold out, but more copies will be printed in June, and Bill will bring copies to the meeting, after their return from (the Panda area of) China.

Speaker Syllabus from June till November 2012 by Ben Goonan

13/06/12 David Stewart
Entomological Society of Victoria, 'June 2004 - June 2012 image records of fauna response to the provision of a permanent water point in a Dry Woodland Fragment'

11/07/12 Dr Mike Weston and Kasun Ekanayake, Faculty of Science and Technology, School of Life and Environmental Sciences, Deakin University: 'Little Ravens as predators and adaptations of prey'

08/08/12 Dr Clive Minton
Victorian Wader Study Group, 'A Lifetime of Bird Banding'

12/09/12 Dr Peter Vesk
The Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Environmental Decisions, School of Botany, University of Melbourne: 'To-wards spatial prioritisation of revegetation for birds'

10/10/12 Dr Gregory Holland
Research Fellow, Faculty of Science and Technology, School of Life and Environmental Sciences, Deakin University: 'Fire in box-ironbark forests: an experimental investigation of ecological outcomes'

14/11/12 Professor Max Finlayson
Director, Centre of Research Excellence: Institute for Land, Water and Society, Charles Sturt University: 'The biodiversity crisis – globally and Australia'

Diary

All Club meetings are held at the Golden Square Senior Citizens Building, Old High St Golden Square, unless otherwise indicated.

Wednesday June 13 **7.30pm**
David Stewart, Entomological Society of Victoria: "June 2004-June 2012 image records of fauna response to the provision of a permanent water point in a Dry Woodland Fragment"

Club Excursions (note: two June excursions)

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Leader: Anne Bridley
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Regular Fauna Excursions
Every Friday morning starting at around 9 to 9:30 the Fauna Group inspects nest boxes in the Spring Gully area. The excursions are led by Maurie Lewis, 16 Vains St. Golden Square. Phone 0407 427 179. Phone Maurie to confirm exact departure times and location. If you don't phone and go directly to Maurie's house and find nobody at the house between 9 and 9:30, then the excursion is not on.

Family Nature Club
The next activity will involve a trip to the Wellsford forest, making damper as well as little kids and giant trees. Please register if you are turning up with family, or let Jan and Rod know if you intend to offer assistance.
Check out their 2011 and 2012 activities at http://bendigofamilynatureclub.blogspot.com/

Registration:
Bendigonatureclub@gmail.com or 5443-1326

Fire Operations Planning Consultation
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Further information will be available when an agenda has been established and DSE has invited participation from regional environment groups. If you would like further information, or are interested in participating please contact Richard Goonan (richardgoonan@impulse.net.au).

Wildlife Rescue & Information Network Inc.
W.R.I.N. is an organisation dedicated to the care of orphaned, sick or injured native animals. It is fully endorsed by the Dept of Sustainability and Environment.
Please call our Emergency Number for Help for Fauna in Need. Phone: 0419 356433.